



On “Portrait: Two Girls in a Bed” by Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum

Shock, Sigmund Freud wrote, is the necessary precursor to orgasm. I do not remember the source text, or the context. It is interesting to consider the implications of this remark—why, if we grant Freud his premise, sharp and pungent sensations experienced by the brain can produce correspondingly extreme physical reactions. One implication concerns art, whose task it is to create and sustain sharp and pungent brain sensations, which can resound physically as well. What could be more shockingly sharp, and pungent, than queerness doubled, then re-doubled ad infinitum? Here, in Jeremy Eric Tenenbaum’s “Portrait: Two Girls in a Bed,” queerness has the potentiality not only to signify lesbianism but the queer, as in the strange, the eerie, the noir, even (from the perspective of stability and standardized portraiture expectations) the disconsolate. This is, to paraphrase Barthes, not a work of standardized pleasure but of forceful (perhaps fearful), shock-inducing bliss. The foreplay it forces is to watch singles double and significations in general multiply (as questions self-generate, it is

easy to imagine the photo a newfangled Grecian Urn)— whether the girls are lovers or not, and why one is fully dressed and the other nude; why the artist has created, out of his own shocking perversity, a perspective from which the girls are watching something we can't see, what it might be and what their shocks are against ours; how the exterior, red walls of the bedroom (which are shocking to begin with) have metaphorical, physical and metaphysical doubles in several directions (once the triangle is formulated of the artist and the two girls); and the pure, blunt attractiveness of the nude wrapped in a bed-sheet in the foreground, whose bulging blue eyes have in them an intimation which splits between physical violence and orgasmic release (and over whom a projection of “butch” or “butchness” may or may not apply).

The girl in a bed-sheet covers one level of singular meaning— that she is the muse of the photo. She is, in fact, a muse worthy of Manet— frank, but with a streak of coyness which elevates her over Olympia; and as breathtaking, in this context, as the mistress of Luncheon on the Grass. If she, and this piece, resonates as contemporary in 2013, it is because photography as a medium, particularly American photography, is customarily not rich enough, formally or thematically, to carry the nuances, innovations, or multiple meanings of classic and classicist European art. Multiple meanings and nuances don't have to create a sense of the ponderous (as Americans are wont to suggest); here, as in Abby Heller-Burnham's “The Walls Have Ears,” the shock tactics employed engender not only arousal (sexual, emotional, and/or intellectual) but giddiness, the aesthetic equivalent of a line of cocaine (the sight of which was no stranger to Freud). To speak in the parlance of Center City Philadelphia, it can get you high, and off.

The evidence is irrefutable— no one who has ever been shocked into an awareness of their physical sexual instincts is unfamiliar with queerness. Sex is strange. While you gaze at your lovers, they're looking at something or someone else. Another jolt into awareness: who has more power, the nude or the clothed? Intermittent or partial nudity has many shocks built into it— one reason Tenenbaum makes Robert Mapplethorpe's nudes look unimaginative, cold, and clinical. New York's cocaine buzzes around the arts have always been cold ones; Philadelphia in the Aughts (when this was taken) was warmer, stranger, and giddier. The seeds it planted towards further multiplications have only begun to blossom, against the American grain and producing the necessary friction for meaningful conception to occur.

Adam Fieled, 2013